

Q: Good afternoon. Today is February 2nd, 2017. My name is Melanie Egan and I am here at City Hall with Mr. Ivan Samuels. Together we are participating in the Newton Talks Oral History Project that is being conducted with the Newton Free Library, Historic Newton, and the Newton Senior Center. So what is your connection to Newton?

A: I live here. I pay taxes here. Moved to Newton in 1966, bought a house on Park Street, raised four kids, went to all the Newton schools, was Co-President of the PTA at Underwood, my wife is President at Underwood and Bigelow and Newton North, and I was President of the PTA Council and then some years later my wife followed me in that role as well. And in the early years I was on several committees in Newton, did some things for Mayor Mann and others, and then sort of faded into the background. Okay? But I'm entrenched.

Q: What were you doing before you entered the service? Or what was life like for you before you entered the service?

A: I grew up in Brooklyn, New York, born in 1932, Depression, then World War Two came about. During World War Two we used to go to Coney Island. We would see oil slick and occasionally boxes from ships that were sunk. And as kids we would pick up packs of cigarettes and candy and anything else that came through. Couldn't eat it if it was waterlogged, but it made an impression, because ships were sunk off of New York, off of Long Island. And went to school, went through high school, Siverson High School in Manhattan, which is a Science and Math School, an Exam School. I went to City College uptown. Should have been an engineer, but got a Bachelor's in Psychology.

But the Korean War was on, and they hadn't started draft deferment tests yet, and my friends joined Army ROTC, but I was a Boy Scout, so I knew what it was to sleep in the mud and cold, and said, "I would rather be enlisted in the Navy than an Officer in the Army." So, I joined the Naval Reserve and figured if I had to go on Active Duty as a white hat and a sailor I would do that. And then they started an Officer program which was two summers of training at that time in

Long Beach, California, and I got into it. And the two summers of training and the Bachelor's degree got the commission, and I went on Active Duty.

Spent some time in Norfolk, Virginia on a command staff and then got assigned to, after my nagging the Navy, I finally went to sea. When you're single you want to go see the world. I had Shore Duty. It was alright in Norfolk. Virginia Beach was close by. And I got a ship, a cargo ship home ported in Barcelona. Spent a year in and around the Mediterranean, and that was very interesting, enjoyable. We had a little bit with the Russians in trying to break up formations with ships like they're doing now with aircraft and the Chinese are trying to do with aircraft and ships. The Russians were doing that in the Mediterranean.

Decided to get out. Didn't see a career path for myself in the Navy. Stayed down south for a while, Virginia and North Carolina. Hated it. People were too slow. They moved slow, they spoke slow. I came back to New York. I won't go into details, but I went to work at the City College of New York, and MIT had come down recruiting engineers, found me and hired me to be Director of Personnel for what is now Draper Laboratory. That's what got me up here in 1957. I joined the Naval Reserve. I stayed with that. Met my wife about two years later. She is a transplant. I had three commands, Reserve commands, so it was a good career. Didn't make Admiral, made Captain, same as a Colonel in the Army. And I made a lot of friends, Navy friends.

Got active in an organization called the Navy League of the United States, which is a civilian organization which supports all of the sea services and we sponsor the Sea Cadets, Naval Sea Cadets, Drug-Free program, and still active in that. And as I said before, I raised my kids, a boy, three girls. My son went to the Naval Academy and he spent his five years on Active Duty. He got out, didn't stay in the Reserve. The girls were all married. Eight grandchildren. And we're still here paying taxes.

I could go on and on. [Laughter]

Q: So, how did you join and why did you choose that specific branch?

A: I told you. I answered that before.

Q: How did you adapt to military life, including the physical regimen, barracks, food, and social life?

A: That was a challenge, because my mother always said, “Ivan, how could you be so nice and everybody says you’re so nice as a kid and you’re so rotten at home?” And I sort of objected to things, but when you join the military you learn to keep your mouth shut. And it wasn’t easy in some ways, people said, “You’re Jewish. Why are you in the Navy?” The Navy had a history of discrimination. And I said, “People are going, they’re going to accept me for what I am, for what I can do, and not for religion or what I look like or anything else. I think that’s what I want to do.” And I did and it paid off, because I got commands, I got promoted.

But it is a change going from civilian life. The military you go in and the aim is to tear you down so that you’re responsive to commands, and if you go into a perilous situation, whether it’s the Army or the Air Force or the Navy, whatever, you have to understand that when an order is given you have to obey it, because the lives are at stake and you can’t raise your hand and say, “I don’t want to do that” or “Why are we doing that? We shouldn’t be doing that.” There are times when you can object to something, if it’s illegal and other reasons, and some of our military people have objected to things, but when you first go in you really don’t know much, and the best thing to do is keep your eyes and ears open. And they said, “Don’t volunteer for anything” but I always volunteered for things. And I found that I got ahead, because I did volunteer.

And what I said before about service and Newton, the things that we did, always had service. College I was in a service fraternity. It was Alpha Phi Omega, which is the Boy Scout service

fraternity. We ran the blood bank and the used book exchange and the lost and found and did ushering and freshman assemblies, all that is fun and happy stuff.

But basically to answer your question it's a shock. [Laughter]

Q: How did you stay in touch with family and friends back home?

A: When I was in the States phone calls probably once a week, once every other week, letters, a lot of letters, some very short. When I was board ship we couldn't call. We didn't have an internet, we didn't have iPhones, and to make a telephone call, a brief telephone call from Spain to New York was like \$20 dollars for three minutes. I mean who had that kind of money? So, I would call every once in a while, but not regularly. It was mostly letters. And my mother took my letters and typed them out and I have them, up to a certain date I have them in a notebook, which is interesting. I didn't realize that until we cleaned out her house after she passed away.

Q: Do you remember arriving and what was it like?

A: Arriving where?

Q: Where you served.

A: Yes. My first duty assignment was in Norfolk. This was 1953. I checked in at the Naval base, got assigned to a BOQ, Bachelor Officer Quarters, but I didn't have to report in to anyone until the next day. I didn't have a car, so I knew I had to go shopping for a car. And I rode the bus from the Naval base into downtown Norfolk. Okay. I had to take-- And I shopped around. I had to take the bus back and it was crowded, but there were seats in the back of the bus. So I went to the back of the bus and I sat down, and then I looked around and everybody was looking at me. They were all Black. Back then Blacks sat in the back of the bus and toilets were separate, drinking fountains were separate, and that was, I'm from Brooklyn, New York, it didn't make

any difference to me, but that was a learning experience. That was my first day, my first day in Norfolk.

I got to like Norfolk, made a lot of friends. One of my good friends, since passed away, was Scoutmaster of a Boy Scout troop, and I wanted to get involved with the community, so I became the Assistant Scoutmaster, because Boy Scouts have older sisters, so that was one reason. And so I made friends in the community. And a lot of military people don't. They stay on the base and they do all their activities on the base. But I made friends.

And then I got, finally after putting in requests for transfer and requests for transfer, I extended for a year and I got the ship that I went to. But I really wanted to go to the Far East and I wanted a combatant ship, a destroyer or a cruiser or something, and I got a cargo ship. But it was okay.

Q: What are some of your most memorable experiences, positive or negative?

A: Positive being treated fairly. I had one other thing that is interesting you northerners would appreciate. During the Officer training that I mentioned, the two summers, my first summer was my first flight, American Airlines from New York to Los Angeles. I went aboard. We got a shoebox as we boarded the plane and in it was our lunch. It was a sandwich, a container of milk, and an apple. First flight. Breakfast the next day we had these metal trays, brought down the chow line, and it was breakfast, and they had cereal in a container. And I said, "Oh, that looks like Farina." So I had a dollop of that on my tray and I added some milk and a little bit of sugar, along with the other stuff for breakfast. And the guys at the table looked at it and they said, "What are you doing? What are you doing?" I said, "Well, it's Farina cereal. I'm putting, I like it with milk and sugar." "What do you mean Farina cereal? Them is grits. You have grits. You put salt and pepper on them." Again you learn. [Laughter] But what was the question?

Q: Your most memorable experience.

A: That was memorable. Certainly riding the bus was memorable. Some good things, my first assignment was in crypto communications. I got out of that quickly and got a billet that was for an engineer and I wasn't an engineer, but I had a strong technical background, and they plugged me in so that they wouldn't lose the billet. And I did some things to study on ships and corrosion of tankers, but the studying that I came out with recommended a certain way of lining the tanks to preserve them and keep the rust particles from getting into the fuel, which could contaminate the aircraft engines. And my immediate boss, the Navy Commander, was favoring a different method of preserving the tanks, so I wrote this report and he pocketed it, kept it in his desk, and never sent it up to the Head of Bureau of Naval Ships, because he favored this other method. Whether he was getting paid by somebody or what, but he favored this other method.

He got transferred and a new Commander came in to be my boss, and he said he had heard that a study was done, there were about 10 of us that did different things and we had responsibilities for different kinds of ships. I had the ammunition ships and the refrigerator ships and some of the oilers. And he, this Commander, Frankenberg was his name, came and he asked this question and they pointed at me and said, "Well, Samuels had written something, and they didn't know what happened to the report." I keep a copy of everything I do. Went to my desk, came out with the copy, gave it to him. He forwarded it right up through the commands, the Admiral signed off on it. It went to the Bureau of Ships. And that's what they started.

What it was was you clean the tanks and you put a plastic coating, they called it saran, like saran wrap but plastic coating, to protect the steel from the corrosive effects of aviation gasoline. So that was good. Even though I was disappointed in one Officer, this other Officer did the right thing. He made Admiral. And I sort of used him as an advisor and when I was talking about staying in the Navy or getting out of the Navy he gave me some very good advice and he said, "There are a lot of divorces in the military. On the other hand, in the Navy you're away for six months and you come home for six months. So, when you come home it's like a second honeymoon, and by the time you get tired of each other you're off again at sea." And somebody

else said, “You’re away for half the year, you only fight half as much.” But I was single so it didn’t make any difference. Those were interesting things.

One of the reasons I got out, I really liked the Navy, I love it at sea. I’ll come back to that. And aboard the ship I had a former enlisted man who made, got his commission, and he was a very good seaman and he knew, he knew ship handling and he knew navigation and lots of other things. And I learned a lot from him. He got transferred off and somebody else came in, relieved him, and became my boss who I had no respect for, nobody on the ship had respect for, because how he got assigned to the ship I don’t know, but it was a big mistake on the part of the Navy to do it. In fact the crew at one time talked about throwing him over the side. He was that bad.

The Captain of the ship threw him off the bridge a couple of times, because he couldn’t do-- he did stupid things. And I said, “You know, if the Navy sees fit to promote somebody like this and put him in a position of responsibility I don’t want it.” Besides I looked ahead and I wanted a family. I was thinking of going to Graduate School. I got accepted by Cornell. I was going to go to Cornell School of Industrial Labor Relations and decided not to, and got out, got off Active Duty, but I stayed in the Reserve. And that was one of the best things I ever did.

I was going to come back to--

Q: The sea.

A: What’s that?

Q: The sea that you wanted to come back to?

A: Oh the ocean. Here in the Boston area, I told you I was active in the Navy League and through the Reserve also, and Navy League, we commission Navy ships here. In 2007 we commissioned a cruiser in Boston, the USS Sampson. She is out in the Pacific now. In 2002 we

commissioned the USS Preble. She is also over there. We commissioned the Bunker Hill. We commissioned other ships. I was Chairman of the Commissioning Committee for those last two ships that were here.

This cap that I brought that I'm wearing, this ship hasn't been commissioned yet. You know who Thomas Hudner is? You ever hear the name? Have you heard the name? Have you heard the name? What a shame. Tom Hudner is a Medal of Honor recipient from the Korean War. He flew corsairs and during the Battle of the Chosen Reservoir his teammate is flying another plane from the same ship, got shot down, crashed on a snowy hillside with the North Koreans and Chinese closing in. Tom Hudner lives in Concord. He is still alive. He is 92. He has got Parkinson's and a few other things, so we hope he lasts. We're planning on commissioning that ship being built up at Bath, Maine in the fall, late summer or fall of 2018, we hope. I'm on a Commissioning Committee. I'm not Chairman of it.

When we commissioned the Samson I mentioned in 2007 I was asked to Chair the Commissioning Committee. I didn't want to do it, because I had been on too many other committees, and we knew the ship wasn't going to be home ported on the east coast so that we wouldn't be able to raise enough money to do things that we want to do to help the crew and help the ship. So I went online and I remembered that during World War Two there was a Navy Bootcamp Training Camp just north of New York City, and I looked it up and it wasn't there anymore. It was a state park. And I figured well there is a town maybe that I can link up with the ship, but there was no town. But the next line down it said, "Public School 160 Admiral Samson Elementary School Brooklyn, New York". Guess who went to that elementary school. Small world.

We never called it the Admiral Samson School. I called the school, spoke to the Principal. She said, "Oh it was always named that way." And I said, "We never did." My mother was President of the PTA. That's in the family. And we, I checked with my brother who passed away two

weeks ago, he is, he was five years older, and he never heard it called the Samson School, my sister eight years younger never heard it called the Samson School.

But the school was named back in the early 1900s, 1902, 1903, they were naming schools after military heroes. I went to the John Jake Pershing Junior High School. You know who General Pershing was? You know who General Pershing-- No? General Pershing, World War One. And so it had the name. So we went down to visit a female Officer in Essen and enlisted, a Petty Officer. Now I visited the school, went down to Brooklyn. All Chinese or Vietnamese or whatever, and the other half of the school was of Hispanic derivation. A lot different from when I went there. You can't go home again. You'll find as you get older you go back to school, if the school still exists, the corridors are not as big as you thought they were, the rooms, Principals Office I remembered greatly from when I was in elementary school. I spent a lot of time there. I rebelled. But coming back to it, I love the sea, so every time I could go to sea I would go to sea.

As a Reservist I would always get a ship. We got smaller vessels, minesweepers, etcetera, and I would cruise and go down the Caribbean in February. We would go to San Juan and Saint Thomas and also later in destroyers and come back, and my wife has to shovel the snow out while we were gone. And when I got too senior to go aboard Navy ships, because I couldn't be senior to the Commanding Officer, it makes it awkward, when you're retired it's okay, but if you're still in the Reserve you still have some responsibility and authority, but I got to be too senior, so then when I was on Commissioning Committees I would go down to Norfolk or to Newport if we were going to be in Newport and ride the ship back up to Boston, so I would be at sea overnight.

The John F. Kennedy, the aircraft carrier, it's now gone, I rode her twice from Norfolk up to Boston. The last time she was up here I rode her and it was a shame, because they were tearing her down by that time and reducing the crew. But I love it at sea. I still do.

Q: What was it like to return to civilian life?

A: Easy. [Laughter] Nobody told me what to do. Yes. That was easy. I had no trouble. The biggest problem was getting a job. I stayed in Norfolk, because this friend of mine who was a Boy Scout Leader, he was working for a company, so I went with him and I wound up doing some work for that company, opened up an office in Petersburg, Virginia, which is about 20 miles south of Richmond. And then they transferred me down to Greensboro, North Carolina, which wasn't bad because it's a beautiful area down there, Greensboro, golden triangle. If you ever get to North Carolina.

And at that time it was the women's college and the University of North Carolina. It's now co-ed, but that was great. But as I said earlier, I hated it down south, I just couldn't stay there, so I packed up, came back to New York, and six months later came to Boston, 1957, and stayed. But it was easy. I was a civilian at heart. The military wasn't engrained in me.

Q: How did your service and your experiences affect your life and your outlook on war and the military in general?

A: The Reserve more than the Active Duty, because it gave me command authority, it gave me more responsibility, and had to look out for more people than my own immediate circle. I think I was always looking at society, etcetera, I think I was always somewhat of a fiscal conservative and a moderate social type, and still am. But I don't think the military, I don't know, I just grew that way. I had my own business. I worked at three, MIT, and then two electronics or defense companies, science companies, and then went off and got into the executive search business, and then became a partner and then owner, and that's what put bread on the table all the years until I closed the business. I got along with everybody. I made some enemies along the way, but I try to get along with people. I don't know if that answered your question.

Q: What would you like people to know a hundred years from now?

A: About me or in general?

Q: Just in general.

A: A hundred years from now. Interesting. History, I would like people to know history and learn, learn from history what we did wrong and what we did right. People today don't really know. There are a lot of things you don't know that went on. You don't know what it was like to live in the Depression. Where did food come from? Or during World War Two, I remember stamps, you had to have stamps to buy things, red stamps and blue stamps and whatever, and gasoline was rationed. And we in the United States were very fortunate, but people in Europe and other parts of the world were not as fortunate as we were.

The shortages of food. We said, "Okay, there was shortages of gasoline or there was shortages of meat." Or you heard that, oh the A&P got a shipment in of canned tuna fish, so you rushed down with your stamp books and were able to buy whatever cans of tuna fish. Word got around. You think about other countries where they do that just to get a loaf of bread. So I would say history is the most important thing, and learning from it.

Q: Is there anything else you would like to add, any other memories or experiences?

A: I could talk all day. I think that people should be respectful of other people's opinions and whether they agree or disagree be respectful of them. I'm so disappointed at the riots that we have been having and the displays that we have been having regarding the last election. For better or for worse we have a President. If he does wrong he'll get impeached. I think he will, he is getting a lot of noise now, but people who you would have assumed would have taken it in stride, people who were on the losing side of the election, the reaction was, I did not expect the reaction that was there. Disappointment yes, but people saying, "I'm going to move to Canada" and then they never did, or going to resign from the United States. You take it and you live with

it and you make the changes, do what you can in the next go-around. You want change then you try to make change and work from within.

I would like to see people be able to spend more time doing volunteer work, whatever it is they, whatever it is the heart leads them to, whether it's to help out in a nursing home or to help out in the streets or whatever or make contributions or work in an organization that does good things. And we don't see that anymore, not a lot of it. Every organization is struggling to get volunteers in. I mean here I talked about the Navy League. At one time we were 76,000 members and we're now down to 40,000. All organizations, and it could be a Red Cross chapter, it could be anything, the volunteers aren't there to do things that we did years ago.

Remember from some time back, think about it today. Where are the volunteers? And then you look at the politicians, and for the most part politicians at the national level, they're lawyers. They never earned a living in their lives. They never worked for a living. They're lawyers. And I think that is the bottom line. I can close with that.

Q: So it looks like our time is just about up. Thank you so much for taking time to do this with us. We're really happy to be able to include you in the Newton Talks Oral History Project.

A: I hope I didn't talk too much. [Laughter]

END OF INTERVIEW